

Chapter 15

Developing a Practice of Cultural Awareness in Pre-Service Teachers by Promoting Positive Dialogue Around Diversity

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ABSTRACT

Within higher education there are dynamic constructs surrounding discussions on race, gender and bias. Courses detailing inclusive pedagogy and university restructuring for diversity initiatives are at the forefront of higher education administration strategic planning. By drilling down into educator preparation programs, it is often assumed that the notion of conversations about diversity and teaching cultural awareness has long been a standard of practice. Solid educator preparation programs tout cultural awareness and assist in preparing teachers to effectively teach and serve in diverse school settings. This preparation allows for new teachers to feel secure in methods to meet the needs of learners through content and personal connection. This chapter will identify the strengths of a pre-service teacher preparation program designed to implement cultural conversation early in the baccalaureate program. The program is centered around learning strategies, techniques and pedagogical practices based on theoretical implications and class discourse relating to all areas of diversity.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly diverse society, classrooms across the nation have experienced shifts in culture, language and ethnic background. Teacher preparation programs have worked proactively and in sync with the ever growing changes in the K-12 student population to prepare future teachers to understand and cultivate the diverse cultures and backgrounds of those of whom they will teach.

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Even with propitious research in place that urges teacher preparation programs to promote a practice of culturally responsiveness and reformulate the traditional approach, many institutions still do not follow suit with vigilance. Schools of education should be one of the most noteworthy examples of preparing graduates for diverse work environments. While there are some that do an exceptional job of this, there are others where these conversations take a back seat. The role within higher education is to prepare an educated and empowered workforce to meet the growing needs of employers and a diverse nation. In order to do so, higher education administration and faculty have to bridge theory with practice and substantially enhance the cultural awareness and appropriateness of its graduates. In addition to the important role offices of diversity, inclusion, and equity cultivate on each campus, it is also imperative that the tenets associated with those offices are embedded as practice throughout courses and across campuses.

This chapter, includes key research literature about cultural awareness practices in higher education and further investigates similar literature relating to schools and colleges of education. Additionally, the author sheds light on a replicable teacher education program designed for pre-service teachers from a regional state institution. The program features curriculum which encourages pre-service teachers to engage in dialogue about critical issues surrounding diversity within the K-12 classroom. This chapter acknowledges significant and critical reflections from teacher candidates through anecdotal and qualitative data. The highlighted participant reflections will allow the reader to identify and implement useful practices for introducing diversity and cultural awareness in a similarly developed program.

The objectives for this chapter are:

- To identify a successful model in a teacher education preparation program that provide rich emphasis in cultural awareness in classrooms and summarize substantial practices of those.
- To highlight the literature on diversity and cultural awareness which will provide the reader with go to practices on implementing exemplary cultural awareness programs.
- To share reflection data from a program for undergraduate pre-service teachers who were taught cultural awareness using strategies centered on critical conversations (Harste, 2000) in teaching diverse populations.

BACKGROUND

Diversity, in higher education, is a term that is often used repeatedly in annual institutional, college and department level quality assurance and accreditation standard reports. It is often touted by institutions as a point of pride, as it represents a population of students, faculty, staff or is all encompassing. Diversity, more recently is centered around equity, inclusion and representative of all within higher education. Morgan (2013) further argues that viewing diversity as “the one size fits all approach in higher education” will no longer suffice when developing an inclusive institutional profile. In university or college mission statements, recruitment packets, brochures and social media, there are pictures, quotes, phrases, membership affiliations, that all point back to an indication that diversity exists on campuses across the nation. The pivotal United States cases that promoted equality and justice in public and educational settings catapulted the movement of inclusion and equity for students of color, from *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Given these historical accounts shaping the nation in a direction of inclusiveness, the presumption is that education would be the foremost population to embrace these notions.

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